



CITY OF GHOST CHILDREN

Ade Zeno

Short Story

ISSUE ONE—TEMPEST

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AND THEN, AT A CERTAIN HOUR, it gets dark in the Black City and sky and earth turn to merge into one. But at sunrise the labyrinth changes appearance, the light takes everything back and bathes corners, lanes, walls of white lime. Soon even the name changes shape: a few syllables whispered by courier drivers heading north or by border guards while they sift through passports, shaking their heads. To the stubborn traveler a detailed list of disadvantages will be genteelly laid out: too long a journey, tortuous roads, sandstorms, marauders lurking everywhere. Not to mention the destination itself: a tangle of ruins inhabited by malaria and hungry beasts. No hotels, no hospital, erratic potable water, unknown bacteria ready to scoff at unprepared antibodies.

No one will be willing to show you the way to the Black City. Unless you have a lot of money. Or a crazy friend.

Of the two, as far as I'm concerned, the second.

His name was Antoine, and his first life had ended there. He had money, madness, and an obstinate voice that buzzed in your head. Leave, go, he repeated over and over. Fly to the city where everything gets lost. Don't ever come back.

He was an accomplished pilot, no one knew those skies better than him.

Already the following day some reporters would have referred to an accident, others to an enemy strike that had made him disappear in the ocean. His body, though, was sinking elsewhere, here: in the city where by magic we return to being what we were and still will be. Pinwheels, specters. Bewildered ghost children.

We weren't really friends, Antoine and I. Uniting us, if anything, was a bond similar to a formal correspondence, an exchange between strangers so like-minded that they recognize each other at first glance. He was noble, I was rootless, we had crossed paths in the heart of a Europe battered by the same neverending war. He was ugly, fat, elegant. He had a wife and dozens of lovers.

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Then, at night, while the rest of the world dreamed and died in the trenches, he filled his journals with maps and notes. Until the day he decided to talk about it with someone, before everything vanished into nothing.

It's not exactly that he talked to me about it: the confidence—let's call it that—in reality was entrusted to three postcards, written a few weeks apart. They reached me only by a miracle, two years after the end of the war.

I won't be so irresponsible as to reveal their contents: others, after me, might make the mistake of venturing to the Black City, and this must not happen. Suffice it to say what the three messages contained, in order: a confession; a statement of intent; a desperate plea for help. The first disoriented me. The second made me smile. The third, however, forced me to pack my bags and set off.

In the ghost city the air has the taste of dust, and when the sun goes down, nothing seems to make a sound and nothing seems real, not even the hot wind that glazes your eyes, not even the throats of the stray cats that move the tiles overhead, among the thousands of roofs laying on houses without owners. The nights are a long interval in which breaths tremble and silence makes its way. Walking along the sidewalks that border the central roads—a gut of narrow, fetid streets—is the one way not to be seen. At your side, hidden among the shadows, hesitant silhouettes of the survivors will move too, that disarmed army of straying children.

Antoine's confession had to do with a crime (as serious as it is unverifiable) for which he held himself responsible to the point of deserving an exemplary sentence. In the second postcard, more articulated than the previous one but less lucid, he reported news of a place where it would be possible to atone for ignominious sins, a city governed by secret powers able to purify men. The third message, finally, came from there, and the devil only knows how he managed to send it. According to what he wrote, he had arrived a few

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days earlier, but already found himself on the edge of the abyss. Together with the postcard, in the envelope without postage that trembled in my hands, I found a map with notes, along with a plea to run and get him. He could have turned to a father, to a brother, to the most infatuated of the lovers. Instead he had chosen me, an intimate stranger with a listless heart.

Returning from the front I had found emptiness: father and mother buried under the bombing, two brothers missing in the Ardennes, and a fiancée who had run off with a rich Russian merchant. All this Antoine could not have known, yet something must have convinced him that sadness and oblivion had been forever written in my destiny. Only you can I ask, a smudged cursive insisted. Only you can do it.

The trip lasted thirteen weeks. From a Tunisian merchant I learned that the City was found two hundred kilometers further west than my maps. Some Algerian smugglers swore on the lives of their children that the right direction was the opposite.

The madam of the finest brothel in Aleppo demanded a sum equal to nine nights of love to assure me that I had taken the wrong road again. Yet even sifting through so many inventions, some truth always finds a way to emerge. I found out soon enough that in the Black City I would die right away if I didn't get a seven-pointed star tattooed on the right side of my neck. And that that same brand would get me killed if ever I showed it once I got out. The smooth and melodious voice of a Berber marauder assured me that in all the world there are no guards more ferocious than those recruited to keep watch over the ghost children. When I asked that man, less reticent than the others, who in the world the generals were that commanded the sentinels of the City, his mouth twisted into a feline grin.

The magicians, he confessed after long deliberations. Unclean beings who feed on despair, sucking it from poor fools willing to barter their souls in exchange for illusions. Only if you're desperate will you be welcomed into the City, the Berber continued. Solitary and sad like a dog eaten up by thirst.

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His name was Quabli, he was eighty years old. He made me swear that if I ever made it back alive from the journey, I wouldn't look for him, nor would I tell anyone about our meeting. It's to him that I owe the last, most important directions.

Before arriving, he told me I had better acquire a raw linen niqāb, the only way to try to confuse myself with the others. No one in the City wears clothes other than this, with the exception of the guards, who are covered by ruby-red cassocks that swell downwind like enormous skirts. A cut in the fabric at the neck would display the seven-pointed star, my only pass. It was again the old man who gave me the name of an expert tattooist: the result of that visit to the shop of cockroaches and hot needles still shines on my burnt skin today. The most valuable advice was to cross the walls at sunset, when the guards relax and the ghost children begin to spill out onto the streets. They can't bear the light, the slightest gleam causes them to flee, to huddle on their pallets. Only the magic of the shadows seems to soften them into some semblance of comfort. While the torturers keep watch from above with rifles ready to shoot, the ghost children roam around aimlessly. The youngest—those recently arrived, souls in pain in whom some last instincts still survive—feed on moths and centipedes, hunting swiftly as bats. But most of the lost—several times the Berber called them this—sit helplessly in the dust. Once they had been strong men, maybe handsome, surely rich. Beings used to scrutinizing the world from superior perspectives and exercising the most ambiguous forms of power. Until the day when, for one reason or another, they had chosen to free themselves forever from the burdens of the spirit. They consigned everything to the magicians: gold, deeds, money. The magicians drained the last drop of those miserable souls. No one—concluded the Berber—knew exactly what was offered in return. Indifferent and ruthless, they mastered spells capable of erasing from the mind any trace of the past.

It took me twenty-seven days to find Antoine.

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The truth is that I set off without hope of seeing him again. After two years, his messages belonged to a man who didn't exist anymore. I knew Antoine was there somewhere, but recognizing him in that anthill of specters would have been almost impossible. It didn't take long to understand: once deprived of their souls, the inhabitants of the Black City slowly changed form, assuming, in the course of a few days, the appearance of frail, blond urchins. When I realized it, the suspicion of having failed became certainty, and it was in that moment I understood that I hadn't come there to save a friend, but because I wanted to get lost too, to let myself forget. To become a ghost child myself.

I found him curled up in a puddle of excrement and mud, barely breathing. He was only a child, a skin-and-bones puppy, like all the others. I recognized the slender nose, slightly protruding, delicately turned up. Unmistakable, despite the mutation: an appendage of cartilage and small bones that ever since nursery school had earned him the silly nickname, *Pique la lune*.

I tried to call him, I got no answer. I whispered my name. His frozen eyes betrayed no fear, no anxiety, only distant bewilderment. I was hungry, thirsty, and I feared that once I crouched next to him I wouldn't be able to get back up. I saw the red of a sentinel lurking between the two chimneys of the building opposite, rifle shouldered, the invisible face pointed toward us. He could have shot us, but didn't. Even now I wonder what fear stayed his hand.

We passed the ruins of the Black City, no one objected to our exit. Not a shot, no word shouted from above. The ghost children, frightened, moved away as we passed. Abandoned on my shoulders, the body of Antoine winced, while I sank in the sand, expecting a snake bite at every step. In front of us the night caressed the sea of dark dunes, keeping the right direction secret.

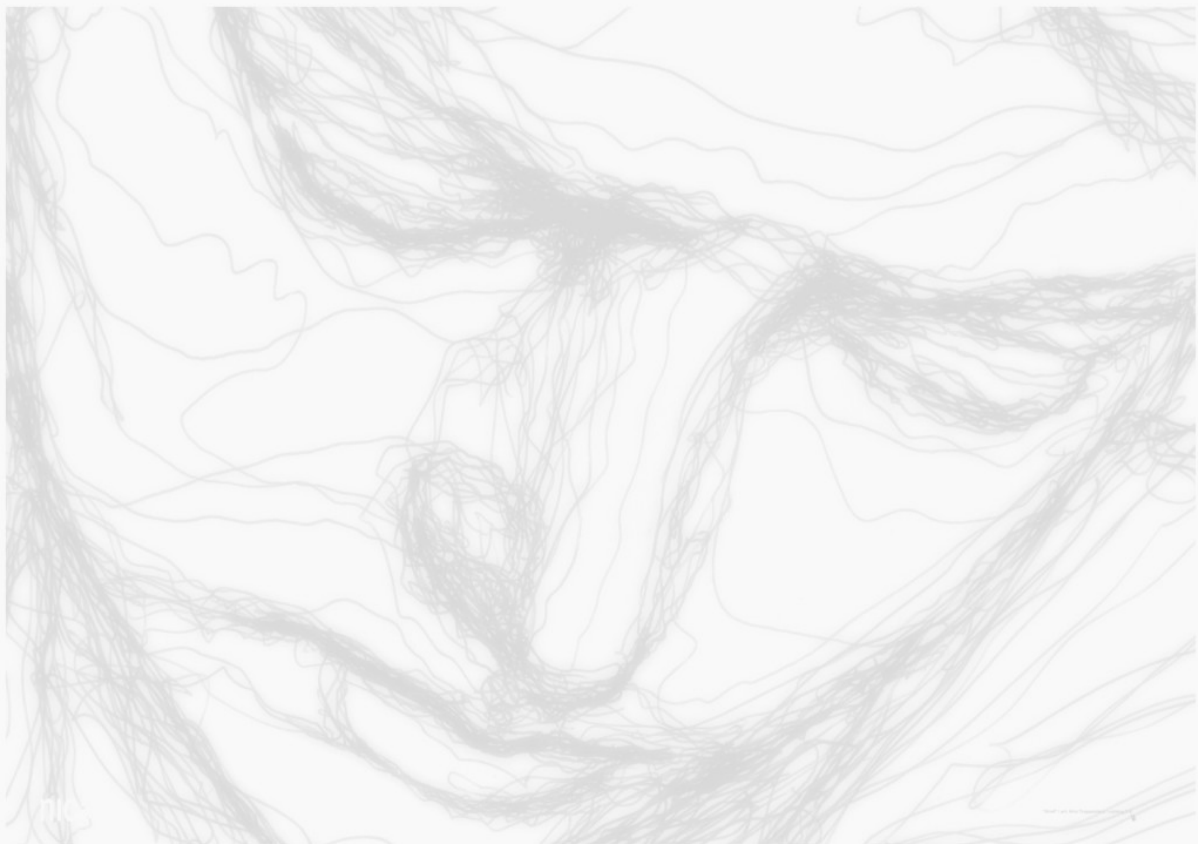
When dawn broke I stopped to greet the last stars. The child slept, I felt his mouth blowing the slow breaths of sleep. Crying, I kissed his knee, it tasted of salt.

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Translation from Italian by Sabrina Fountain

I turned once more. The sun had already begun to color orange the clouds and the now-distant ruins and the ocean of sand that fell silent, guarding our memories, our souls, everything that we were or would never be.



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